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AUTHOR Schallenkamp, Kay; Miller, Timothy E.
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ABSTRACT

The advantages of off-campus extension education courses in rural settings are numerous, and extension courses offered on a noncredit basis present minimal problems for the individuals responsible for administering them. When such courses are offered for credit, however, the problems associated with administering them increase dramatically. Because most extension programs must be self-supporting, the ability to market the product is almost as important as the product itself. Institutions must meet the needs of their constituencies and balance the extension program's budget while simultaneously addressing the need to maintain academic standards appropriate for graduate credit. Too often, extension directors have taken the path of marketing at the expense of rigor. For this reason, administrators or graduate deans and continuing education directors must communicate their program goals and direction to one another and identify appropriate standards to use in developing graduate level off-campus courses. Standards should be spelled out in detail and communicated to all parties involved in delivering programs. Colleges could also offer a dual numbering and prefix system to clarify which courses can and cannot eventually be applied to graduate programs. Local school districts and state departments of education that determine that graduate credit is necessary for advancement on salary or promotion schedules should monitor courses offered through extension and encourage continuing education directors to provide courses meeting graduate program standards. (MN)

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THE PRIORITY OF CONTINUING EDUCATION COURSES:

RIGOR OR MARKETING

by

Dr. Kay Schallenkamp
and
Dr. Timothy E. Miller

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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This paper is a compelation of ideas which were generated while the authors were administering the Northern State College graduate and continuing education programs over the past year and a half. Northern State offers a Masters Degree in Educational Administration, Elementary Classroom Teaching and the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in various secondary school subject areas.

The administrative make-up of the graduate programs, and continuing education office (extension classes), is somewhat unique. Dr. Schallenkamp is the director for both of these areas. Dr. Miller has been assisting Dr. Schallenkamp as coordinator of various programs. On many campuses the duties of these two entities are performed by different invididuals who often have little contact. This paper is a statement on what happens when the missions of each of these programs are juxtaposed and looked at carefully.

The urgency to meet the needs of widely distributed geographic populations has encouraged colleges and universities to offer extension courses at off-campus locations. The advantages of off-campus courses in rural settings are numerous. Educators in elementary and secondary

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schools are able to meet continuing education requirements, advance on salary schedules, and accomplish these goals without traveling great distances or leaving home for summer study. Individuals who are not involved with the schools may also benefit from extension courses offered in the local setting. In many instances, special interest classes such as crafts, drug abuse, death and dying, and computer issues are offered to the general public.

Extension courses offered for non-credit present minimal problems for the individual charged with administering the program. When courses are offered for credit, particularly graduate credit, problems increase significantly.

The concern to meet rigorous academic standards presents a serious problem for those responsible for delivering extension courses for credit. Most extension courses are offered during the evenings or over weekends. Participants and instructors have usually worked a full day and may have driven a significant distance to arrive at a class less than fresh and alert. The college instructor is acutely aware that the participants are the non-traditional students. Some students come with definite agendas to meet a personal/professional need; while others merely wish to complete the mandated certification renewal hours; all are already carrying tremendous work loads which drain them physically and psychologically. The instructor is also aware that the institutional policies require a specific number of contact hours and some external assignments or projects. In many instances, the instructor's salary

is determined by the number of students in the class. Instructors find themselves in the awkward position of maintaining high academic standards and expectations while keeping enrollments high. Many students readily admit that their primary concern is to meet their immediate needs. If the class is too demanding, they will not enroll. In addition, the paucity of library resources in outlying communities often prohibits completion of course assignments which would be required for on-campus classes.

Most extension programs must be self-supporting. The ability to market the product is almost as important as the product itself. This is not necessarily wrong. The purpose of extension is to offer courses for off-campus populations who may be unable to attend regular on-campus classes or who have special needs which are best met in the local community. The conflict arises when the zealous community education directors, school administrators, or continuing education/extension directors attempt to meet all of the community's educational needs through this method. The extension director must have the wisdom and the fortitude to determine which requests would be better met through on-campus courses often knowing that another institution will pick up the courses which were denied. The off-campus constituencies are often confused by the conflicting decisions of different institutions. They ask why does one campus deny a request for a class while another will offer the same class without hesitation.

If extension classes were only used to meet professional certification renewal credit or for professional growth and development, the problems would be minimal. When courses are offered for graduate credit, the complexity of issues increases significantly. Most institutions require that the instructor for graduate level courses hold a terminal degree in his/her subject area. In addition, the academic rigor of graduate courses applied to graduate programs is usually high. Courses offered away from the campus may not have the same expectations and requirements as on-campus courses. This is due in part to the inability to procure adequate library resources and to the unavailability of the instructor when classes are not in session. If adjunct professors are used to teach the courses, the orientations and philosophies of a graduate program may not be adequately understood. In addition, many students collect a potpourri of extension courses for graduate credit and then decide to pursue a graduate degree hoping that the credits will be applicable. They are disappointed that a course which may be extremely relevant to their present position or pragmatic in its orientation may not be accepted toward their graduate degree. Some school districts compound the problem by requiring a certain number of graduate level courses for salary or professional advancement in lieu of a master's degree. In these instances, students may complete 30 graduate hours selected for convenience and not for relevance or rigor. Graduate Deans and Directors of Continuing Education are given the herculean task of determining which extension courses should be accepted toward a graduate program. Since standards vary greatly among

higher education continuing education programs (extension programs), students often must supply documentation relative to course content, course assignments, and a statement of the instructor's credentials, etc. For example, it is not unusual fo find graduate credit offered by local instructors who hold master's degrees. It is also not unusual to find courses which are undergraduate in their orientation and rigor but are offered for graduate credit. Yet, it is undeniable that many extension courses are highly rigorous and worthy of their graduate number. The task of the Graduate Dean and Extension Director in determining which course will be accepted is time consuming and sometimes arbitrary.

The tight rope is narrow. The institution must meet the needs of its constituencies and balance the extension program's budget. Yet, it must also address the need to maintain academic standards appropriate for graduate credit. Too often the Extension Director has taken the path of marketing at the expense of rigor. As educators we must acknowledge the dilemma and attempt to reconcile the problem. It is critical for us to attempt to identify appropriate standards which will be used to develop graduate level off-campus courses.

It is suggested that Graduate Deans and Continuing Education Directors communicate their program goals and direction to one another. It has been the experience of the authors, while talking with others in similar positions, that they are not aware that the situation described in this paper exist; at least they have not considered the situation

to be a problem. Again, the campuses where the two positions are separate may not be as aware of the potential problem as campuses who have the positions being held by one individual.

Further suggestions for how to overcome some of the problems identified in this paper are as follows:

1. As an institution of higher learning it is important to identify appropriate standards which are to be used to develop graduate level off-campus classes. The standards should be spelled out in detail and communicated to all parties involved in delivering the programs. It is suggested that institutions apply the same guidelines as used for on-campus courses, particularly where the off-campus course is being applied toward a graduate degree.

2. The college/university could offer a dual numbering and prefix system. A designated prefix and number could be given to only those credit courses offered for certificate renewal and salary improvement. These special classes could not be applied to a graduate program at a later time. It would be imperative that all persons taking these courses be apprised of the purpose and restrictions placed on the courses.

3. Local school districts and state departments of education need to review their certification requirements with the focus of maintaining a high quality of course work with continuity and rigor.

4. If local school districts and state departments of education determine that graduate credit is necessary for advancement on the salary schedule or for promotion, perhaps they should monitor the courses offered through extension and encourage Continuing Education directors to provide courses which will meet the standards of a graduate program.